

Photographic Essay: Staying Tuned

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Delaware River. Near Easton, Pennsylvania 1998.

Anytime an editor asks for environmental photographs it usually means looking up a file on industrial smoke and gas or something incurably kitsch and cute. When Bill Pencak asked me to consider some photographs for this issue, he was neither specific nor vague in what he wanted but he was, if anything, open and free in his suggestions. Turns out, that was the beauty of the request.

Environment enters the English language as a noun about 1603 and means, variously, everything one perceives in the world. Painters and poets, playwrights and novelists are in essence paid to be highly aware of their surroundings, which means artists, in general, stare a lot. Filmmakers use the words still, frame, and cut for good reason. It's all in an effort to stop the movie, the image, the blur, the world, to grant one slice of time to see and understand a gaff or a confusion, or a new point of view.



Los nuevos americanos. Southside Bethlehem, Pennsylvania 1998.



Bethlehem Steel Corporation. Bethlehem, Pennsylvania 1990.

For over one hundred years, the steel—as it's locally called—has been such a dominating and mythic landscape in the Lehigh Valley that you wouldn't think that one day it would disappear. But above the summer beer and joyful sounds of Musikfest, bulldozers are rumbling and inching their way like giant caterpillars, eating up the rust shop by shop. In a way, it's the twenty-first century chewing up what's left of the twentieth. And here, at the old Bethlehem plant, even what was left of the nineteenth.



North Broad Street, Near Girard Avenue. Philadelphia 1996.



Rolling Mills and Coke Works. Bethlehem Steel Corporation, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania 1990.



Pine and Elder Streets. Easton, Pennsylvania 1998. Formerly Northampton Pants Company. Future site of MCS Industries' Art Gallery and Art Resources.

For some photographers wires are a problem, so they bleach or dodge them out in the darkroom. I have come to really like them. It's all that wild geometry and their ability to convey mass with grace.



Ridge Avenue, near North Broad Street. Philadelphia 1997.

One day my trusty guide and friend, George T. Ridout, Sr., and I take a slow cruise up North Broad. We approach the corner of Ridge and, not noticing anything special and having photographed this corner already, drive right on by Hotel Divine Lorraine and head up towards Temple. "You see that?" he suddenly asks. "You with the big eye. You missed it. That big, empty hole on Ridge? Used to be Scott-Smith Cadillac." He smirks and floors it through a yellow.



Sixth Street and Lehigh Avenue. Philadelphia 1997.

On rural Morgan Hill Road, in Northampton County, I happened to be following a white, mid-sized Plymouth one July afternoon with a blue bumper sticker that read *I support U.S. English*. A gray-haired, past middle-aged woman was driving slowly and, it seemed to me, with unswerving purpose.

It's going to be a tough sell, I thought.

About two hundred and fifty years ago, Williams Township was founded by German dairy farmers. Their names are etched in the weathered stones of the Lutheran Raubsville Cemetery. So today, in 1999, when a sixteen-year-old



Seventh and Diamond Streets. Philadelphia 1998.

kicks off a rickety boat from a Cuban shore, how do you stop the wind? They don't come for the beaches in Miami. They may come because their own destiny is as dry as a piece of Afghani desert and they've seen the water fountains blooming in Las Vegas on the Fox TV News.

But they all come for that fabled dream, or for that indescribable cleanliness that squeaks through the pages of *People Magazine*, and there ain't no mountain high enough. . . .



Waiting for a bus. North Broad and Fairmount Ave. Philadelphia 1997.

You think Harleys are loud? If the deal goes through, just wait until they build that new sports stadium right here in Center City. Mustard, hot dogs, the electrifying cheers, the indignant boos—one may be tempted to think it will be like the old Connie Mack all over again. Fat chance. The money's too big now. It's likely that even the players will be cap-to-cleat billboards for Coke and sparkplugs, NASCAR style. One can't tell for sure what impact such a huge structure will have on the local neighborhoods. A center city stadium may improve public transportation, considering that North Broad



North Broad and Spring Garden Streets. Philadelphia 1997.

and Spring Garden will probably be so congested that there will be a greater demand for buses and subways. Of course, it's all wait and see. Once, to alleviate congestion here on Interstate 95, someone floated a proposal to build another I-95 above the present, eight-laned I-95. Like a bad movie sequel the stilts idea didn't catch on but I have a feeling there's time for this yet. At least it was imaginative, creative. Wasn't it?



Somerset and Second Streets. Philadelphia 1998.

My fondest memories of childhood are from the years I lived in the orphanage, at Coopersburg, in Lehigh County. The land it occupied had once been a farm, like I suppose what most cleared land was before it gets developed and paved over with lawns and asphalt; or before it suffers that curious contemporary treatment of townlessness, where, no matter how many townhouses are newly planted in a last year's cornfield it still doesn't seem to add up to a town or even a loose village.



Inner-city youth. Ninth Street and Germantown Ave. Phila. 1998.

Just off Route 309 then, in Coopersburg, somehow the Sisters of the Sacred Heart received this land and the barns, the sheds, the stables and the Farmall, and set up a coed orphanage. Estimating, in 1955, there must have been over one hundred children. Naturally, it was run like a boot camp. But since most of us had been there practically all our lives we couldn't compare it with any other way of living. We were so lucky then.



Kensington Avenue and D Street. Philadelphia 1997.

Take a taxi up and down Ridge Avenue in center city Philadelphia and you will be transported through a kind of social environmental history. You can almost read it in the bricks. It is where once blue-collar neighborhoods bustled with the clang of streetcars and smokestack jobs, and three-tiered industrial-sized rowhomes radiate off the main like spokes on a wheel, the brickies for which this city is famous. *Deindustrialization* and a number of other cowardly euphemisms put an end to all that, and we accept that one might not trust to walk certain parts of the avenue at night, even down blocks where the corner 'mom and pops' have been replaced with storefronts for Jesus.



North Broad Street, near Poplar Street. Philadelphia 1997.

A well-respected historian at the Franklin Institute lamented that Ridge Avenue “has been that way for years” and it’s true. Over the last twenty-five years the city has lost so many paying industrial jobs that it doesn’t care to count them anymore. Besides, the new century’s around the next corner and we’ve got to get ready . . . for something, because “He that lives upon hope will die fasting,” said Benjamin Franklin, the Master of Ceremonies himself.